



Volume 10
Issue 1 *Poetry*

December 2020

Poetry for Organizing

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Recommended Citation

Bachani, Jyoti (2021) "Poetry for Organizing," *Organizational Aesthetics*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, 1-8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wpi.edu/oa/vol10/iss1/1>

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Poetry for Organizing

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About the Author(s)

Jyoti Bachani PhD, is an associate professor of strategy and innovation at Saint Mary's College of California. She is the founder of the US chapter of International Humanistic Management Association, where she is the flag bearer for the use of Arts to Humanize Management. She is a former Fulbright Senior Research Scholar. Her expertise in case-writing is recognized internationally. She has been reading and translating Hindi poetry into English for twenty years and in the past four years has brought poetry and improv to the Academy of Management and other conferences. In April 2017, she was a featured poet for U.K. Poetry Society's Poetry@3 at Saint Giles in London. She is the founder of a group called Poetry of Diaspora of Silicon Valley that has met monthly since 2017, and since March 2020, had been meeting weekly to read poems in all languages. Some of her poems were published in the anthology called *Celebrating Creativity*, by Kaecey McCormick, the Cupertino Poet Laureate. She earned her PhD at London Business School and Masters in Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University.

Poetry for Organizing

This special issue on Poetry for Organizing is not for everyone. Even though the original attempt was to create a compendium of the best poems for organizational scholars and practitioners, this is not a literary offering. Instead, it is a courageous demonstration of the possibilities of the many different ways poetry can be used as a lens for organizing, self and our place in organizations. This issue is an invitation for a select few curious and open-minded folks ready to explore the potential of poetry as a lens for making sense of organizing. It does this with examples from several of us who have explored this already, and with my personal journey in the process of co-creating this issue with them.

Why Poetry?

Prof. James March is best known for some of the foundational contributions to understanding organizations, decision-making, the behavioral theory of the firm and his vast body of scholarship that has defined our field (March & Simon 1958, Cyert & March, 1963, March 1994). In 2006, he wrote that managerial rhetoric simplifies reality, easing it of its inherent contradictions and uncertainty (March, 2006). He advocated for poetry as a lens because it takes “doubt, paradox, and contradiction” and turns them into beautiful insights about human existence (Brayden, 2017). Prof. March also published eleven books of poetry, although most of the poems he wrote were on topics divorced from his organizational scholarship.

The theories and models I was taught and that are still dominant in the business school curricula are dominated by analytical frameworks that are based on simplifying assumptions. As a practice oriented academic with years of industry experience as a consultant, I find these to often be far removed from the so-called ‘real world’ of practice. These rational models appeal only to our intellect but fail to tap into our intuition and imagination. They can be dry for those of us who work in a whole-hearted manner. The template driven approaches get used as cookie-cutter solutions in the pursuit of efficiency, sacrificing effectiveness in the process.

Poetry requires engagement, often evoking affect, as the reader must make sense of not just the words but also what is conveyed in the metaphors, musicality, the turn of phrase that is evocative and designed to reach what is conveyed in the spaces between words and in-between the lines. The same poem conveys different meaning to different readers, depending on their context, and preparedness to reach the layers of meaning-making possibilities it might have. Even for the same reader and the same poem, new meanings are revealed with re-reading it, depending on time, context or even something as transitory as the mood of the reader. Poetry reading, like organizing, is not a passive thing, but an active verb. In addition to the intellect, it requires imagination and intuition. It has the potential to yield insight that is just beyond words. It allows for subjective contexts, time and reader’s unique situation. It is beautiful or nonsensical, containing paradox and layers accessible differentially. Poetry engages us to reinvent or at the very least rethink our models. The current state of the world makes this relevant, or even urgent.

Why Now? The World Searches For New Ways of Being:

This issue is being released at a time when much of the world has paused all non-essential economic activity to prevent the spread of the Covid pandemic. Technology adoption has exploded to redefine how we humans organize, way beyond the impact of social media. Many organizations have simply disappeared, and those surviving have had to redefine how they conduct their business. People who still have jobs are working from home with the exception of select few essential workers. With empty office buildings, and freedom to live without any

consideration of a commute to office, the real estate market has been impacted. Schools and colleges have new protocols to honor social distancing, as much of education is happening online. How we socialize, celebrate holidays, get groceries, shop, entertain ourselves has changed. Fake news and alternative facts are now legitimate topics of serious academic research. The 'old normal' has disappeared for many. The futurists are forecasting that if Covid is a big wave of change, the real tsunami is yet to come, the climate crisis. This year, many parts of the world have experienced the biggest natural disasters in history, be it the fires in California or floods in India. The scientists have declared that we are experiencing mass extinctions. They urge us to urgently change our ways.

In the USA, democracy has been put to test, and the transition of power from the outgoing President Trump to the Biden Harris team is still dividing the country. The mass movements of recent times, Me Too and Black Lives Matter, have had global repercussions for women and minorities, as others also find their courage to raise their voices and demand to be heard. If the world was ever to change radically, this is the best time for creating the changes. The first Covid vaccines have been announced in less than a year, when the prior fastest release of a vaccine was five years. We are experiencing the great-pause, pregnant with the possibility of lasting change, with our individual and collective daily acts already reorganizing us and laying the foundations for the emerging 'new normal'. Why not take this invitation to engage creatively by considering poetry as a possible lens for looking at organizing? The ancient epic poems like the, Iliad, Odyssey, Gilgamesh, Ramayan or Mahabharata already demonstrate the enduring influence of poetry across the centuries and spread around the globe. Our invitation is a very modest one, a willingness to engage and experiment to discover something different.

The Invitation to Engage

This issue is not a literary compendium of poems on management, leadership or organizational issues even though the original intent was to create just that. Instead, the collection presented in this issue is a set of demonstrations of how others have used creative engagement with the written word to find their way at critical times. These poems and essays are actively created as a way to express their ideas about organizations and indeed their role in our life and in this world. The artistic expressions have the potential to take the readers on the artistic journey with the authors, to see how the authors comprehend and maybe even transcend their unique situations in different contexts. The authors already show how they go beyond the labels they may be given, of being a poet or not, a manager or not, an employee or not, a leader or not, a woman or not, an American or not, to show how they claim their humanity in different conditions. I think of the authors as the courageous ones who have shared a part of their creative self here. It helps if the reader sets intent to search for something as they read. It focuses the imagination and activates the intuition to engage in ways that are more likely to yield insights.

Instead of reading this collection with any expectation of a specific theme or even, just browse and read each piece as a complete experience in itself. There are different kinds of poems, translations of poems in other languages, and short essays with poetry within them. The pieces are used to make observations, offer a commentary or analysis even. A few poems are for self-reflection, with writing as an act of transforming a difficult experience in order to make sense of it or to transcend it. There are poems about ways of communication, about imagining new ways to redesign existing systems, about reinvention and even call for revolution. The topics cover a range from the state of the world, challenges and dreams of individuals in different contexts to description of actions that show ways of organizing. The reader does not need to know the author or their specific context to make sense of the work. The creative expression invites the reader to take the journey with the author to where

something is just beyond what could be described in ordinary writing or words. The choice of words, use of metaphor, turn of phrase or imagery, even musicality can arouse affect that might surprise or delight the reader and hopefully not make them turn away, although if it arouses distaste that too is useful information for self-awareness. If reading prose feels more normal, begin with the essays.

I personally like to approach some poems as oracle. Sometimes it lands as nonsense and other times it delivers the insights to help me make sense of my own quest. I do not expect to see a clear path ahead, but maybe get a clue about my next steps in uncertain or complex times and situations. Turning to poems as oracle happens when the models I have for understanding the world fail me. With hope and belief that answers exist someplace, not as a readymade solution, but as ideas about what or how I must create, I can solve my own situation. Poetry has that space in my life, where just beyond the words and in-between the lines, my imagination and intuition engage to see the parallel or hint of a resonance that is enough to inspire me to make the connections or leaps of faith to trust my own creative muscle again.

This Journey

A few words about the process of creating this pioneering work both as self-reflection and a word of thanks to everyone who made it possible. The creative process has taught me a lot along the way. In the two years that we worked on it, there were major episodes of social, economic and climate unrests in the USA, from protests in the street following the murder of George Floyd to a divisive presidential election during a pandemic. Along with personal challenge and life changes within the editorial team, we came close to abandoning this project. Fortunately, we each wanted to do that at a different time, and the rest of us carried it through as we patiently waited for the one juggling more urgent personal demands to return. Thanks to the editorial team for the exceptional commitment to the purpose, so that with grit and perseverance, sometimes with threats, we got to deliver. This is the first such work and aligned with what Dr. Steven Taylor has been creating with Organizational Aesthetics over the decades. He took a chance on my vision and said yes, guiding me all along with his patient and experienced wisdom. That set the tone for the many creative collaborations based purely on trust and willingness to take action that made this issue possible purely with dedicated labor of love by each and everyone.

In the past five years, I have taken my life long interest in poetry from being a private leisure activity to public reading of poems at management conferences, at invited business talks, in my MBA class rooms, and most recently during the Covid lockdown to faculty meetings on zoom. Based on the positive reactions at the workshops I hosted for other faculty and colleagues at the Academy of Management, Western Academy of Management, Indian Academy of Management, International Humanistic Management Association and other professional conferences, I found out about the Organizational Aesthetics journal, and collaborated with Dr. Steven Taylor for a conference session. Later, when I initiated the process of creating this special issue with a vision spelled out in the original Call for Poems that is in appendix 1, he supported it graciously. The original conception was to collect poems that business community, academics and practitioners, basically others like me, might find of interest. However, the purpose evolved, as people and process of co-creation led the way to this very different final outcome.

Since I am not a poet, I had to find and recruit poets willing to serve, for free, in the editorial roles. They had to trust my vision and commit to co-creating this special issue, with their expertise and outreach to their professional networks. The global team had some hiccups with miscommunications and I had to reconstitute the team to the stable core with Dr. Jenny

Knight and Mona Dash from the United Kingdom and my colleague Dr. Raina Leon joining the endeavor. They are all accomplished poets who also have experience in organizing and organizations. The co-editors were willing to bridge the distance between poets and business people, and work across the different norms that academics and managers or consultants operate under. The diversity of voices from different geography, experience, age, profession and training all made for an unlikely but generative experience.

This issue has been in the works for more than two years. During this time, the editors took turns juggling many life challenges on the domestic fronts, from birth, death, sickness and retirement. There were times each of us was willing to quit and fortunately we rotated these and allowed the commitment of others to bring us back to the work. Dr. Steven Taylor held my hand from the very beginning, training me on the technical platform and gently suggesting that a submission deadline with just two months for poets to send their work might be unreasonable, and a year may be better.

At the end of the first year, we had very few submissions. We could have closed the project then but instead we chose to extend the deadline by another year. In our discussions we learned that poetic world operated with different deadlines than academic business journals. We redoubled our outreach efforts. We established early that the peer review process would be an affirmative one. We explicitly set our intention that we WANT to publish those who are brave enough to venture in this wide-open territory of bringing poetry as a lens for making sense of complexities of organizing. As we finally saw submissions, we realized that many authors had the same passion as us because we were often asked 'how many poems can I submit?' The most common indicator of success in a peer-reviewed journal is a 'revise and resubmit' decision. We, the editorial team, decided upfront that we would honor the artistic creations with either a yes or a no response, to publish or not. Two editors were assigned to each submission. The editorial review was used to decide if the submission had sufficient poetic merit and management relevance. If it passed this hurdle, it was sent forward for anonymous peer reviews. Several poets served as peer reviewers. The final decision criteria included examining the poetic forms of metaphor, musicality or linguistic versatility to see if the manuscript yielded insights not readily accessible with other forms and methods.

The insight and lesson for me was that I was very fortunate to have found colleagues who were tenacious and went beyond the call of duty in offering their sustained commitment to this work, with an exceptional stick-with-it-ness. I was both an enabler and a barrier at different times, but was held accountable honestly to help us finally get it done. This is one of the reasons why I wrote at the start that this is not for everyone, because in my own experience with this journey, I found a few people with exceptional range of interests and willingness to extend themselves for the sake of no external motivation other than to honor their inner voice about creating something in the world with whatever resources we had amongst us. That is the best way of organizing, not without challenges, but with satisfaction for individual and the collective, with patience and clarity, if not love and a quietly expressed passion in sustained action. Here is a poem by Prof. James March (2005) on:

SCHOLARSHIP

For most of the things we do
That anyone notices
The noticing comes a long time
After the doing.
We plant our seeds
In many gardens
For many years before

The first one germinates,
If it ever does.

Much gratitude to Dr. Steven Taylor, the editorial team, all the contributors and you the reader. I learned to let go, to know how and where I belong and that I am not alone in this cause, as there are other passionate ones. I accept the repercussions, ridicule or judgment, that may come as I am still learning to take baby steps in this long creative journey, even as I take this moment to celebrate this milestone. The time is ripe for everyone to reconsider the cookie cutter approach to organizing that bruises all and replace it with a more nuanced one with spaces for subjectivity. Enjoy and be inspired or even rethink some aspects.

Even my imagination is not so wild to permit me to think that this will reinvent organizing in any way, but it changed my thinking in meaningful ways, and affected many whose work was reviewed here, whether or not it was accepted for publication. It was an act of courage to send their work, as it is deeply personal for most poets. I am certain that the issue has already made many re-think a few things, as I did. My experience with the trust-based collaborations that happened has already led to this small but precious to us, reinvention, of the first ever poetry for organizing special issue of a peer reviewed organizational journal. To end on a poetic note, here are a few lines that I translated from a Hindi poem by Leeladhar Jagudi, for you, our adventurous reader:

To repair a tear, you invented needle-and-thread
A bicycle to advance the walk
A plane to fly
You even brought rays of sunshine to light up the night
And crossed the distance to the moon to link it with the earth
Just like that, do rethink this world too.

Appendix 1

Call for Poems:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle.
Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers that there is in it, after all, a place for the genuine. – Marianne Moore (1887-1972), Poetry.

Marianne Moore's poem on Poetry sums up what poetry is for many of us, and the phrase "a place for the genuine" reveals the motivation for a special issue of Organizational Aesthetics (OA). In these times of fake news, fake scholarly publications, and economic, political and sociocultural divisiveness, a new way to see what is genuine is needed. The special poetry issue of OA will offer poems and short essays about poetry related to organizational life to give readers a fresh lens to make sense of how we organize collectively.

Professor emeritus Late Dr. James March of Stanford University, renowned for his impactful management books and articles, published several books of poetry, which far fewer people know about. In 2006, he offered, "the proposition that poetry is a natural medium for expressing and contemplating doubt, paradox, and contradiction-features of life, well known to experienced managers, but normally banished, perhaps with reason, from the public language of management." Coleman (2012) and Denning (2018) offer some ideas about why poetry is relevant for professionals. Poetry allows us to bypass the cognitive filters of our minds to know the world differently. This special issue is the space for poems that bridge our

so-called 'real' work, with our human experience to consider who decides, how and why, what is permitted to be called 'real' or work.

Many world leaders have confessed to turning to poetry for solace. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, a published poet, talking of his life-long interest in poetry said: "I had always been extremely interested in poetry and I used to regret that I just had an engineering and nuclear physics background." Former U.S. President Barack Obama, speaking during a National Poetry Month workshop and reading at the White House on April 17th, 2015, said:

Poetry matters. Poetry, like all art, gives shape and texture and depth of meaning to our lives. It helps us know the world. It helps us understand ourselves. It helps us understand others, their struggles, their joys, the ways that they see the world. It helps us connect ... I think it's fair to say that if we didn't have poetry, that this would be a pretty barren world. In fact, it's not clear that we would survive without poetry.

Social movements have used poems as revolutionary anthems to organize collective action. Business organizations sell products and services using advertising ditties or slogans to convey their messages, relying on poetic tools. Poetry requires readers to engage with each reading of the poem in order to make sense of it, thus bridging the personal and the universal, in each new context. As newer and increasingly accessible technologies liberate many voices, poetry is one way to connect. Poetry is just there, especially when we are not thinking about it, as we experience the world. Most of us recall song-lyrics from different phases of our lives. Workers use songs for easing their work, be it as sing-alongs to hard manual labor or background music for creative and intellectual pursuits. It is time to examine these pervasive influences explicitly.

For this special poetry issue of OA, we ask for submissions of poems and short essays that inform us, transform us, inspire us, and awaken us to new ways of seeing the world, solving its problems, and organizing in ways that serve us all. We invite poems and short essays in the following suggested — but not comprehensive — areas:

- What is organizing, and causes we need to organize for
- What is subtle in organizations and not adequately described in prose
- What in organizations is better captured in-between the words and lines
- Organizational experiences through lyrics, chants, and songs
- Use of words in organizations for communication or miscommunication
- Spoken words in various aspects of organizational reality (walk the talk, slogans, strategic mission/vision buzzwords, e.g., customer-first, be the best, etc.)
- Poetry in research – data collection & analysis and communication of results
- Poetry as an arts-based intervention in organizations
- Ephemerality in organizations such as the same words meaning different things to different people or in different contexts
- Implications for organizational studies from the field of poetry

Poems related to any aspect of organizational and managerial experiences, on topics of how we organize as individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, communities, and societies are appropriate for submission. In addition to organizing, we will also consider poems on causes we organize for, such as any of the topics reflected in business schools' curricula. For example, poems about the role of organizations in society, management, markets, leadership, followership, strategy, ethics, marketing, systems, structure, money, organizing, and related issues about managers, policy makers, professors, students, and even academic life, are all welcome. Poetry maybe a particularly powerful lens for managerial experiences of dealing with eternal dilemmas, ethical issues, balancing individual/personal and collective/professional demands, the trials and tribulations of belonging, relationships at work, the nature of work, creativity and voice, and systemic issues and influences.

Poems in other languages will be considered with translations, provided there is explicit permission from the original copyright holder or evidence that it is not required. The special issue encourages voices of those who have felt marginalized or see things differently from the dominant narratives. We expect submissions that help make fresh sense of the dynamics of organizing, by revealing the subtle rhythms, themes, metaphors, and aesthetics, not accessible by dominant research methodologies. If you have used poems at work, in the classroom, or training workshops, we want to learn about your experiences, in concise essays (under 1000 words). Essays offering a perspective on the use of poetry in organizational life, say, how and why poetry is relevant, how poems are used, or what a specific poem contributes to the practice of management are also appropriate. Essays about a specific poem, a poet, or poetry tradition might be another way to enrich the reader's understanding of organizing. The purpose behind this poetry issue is to have a collection that offers insights to the readers and to develop a broader basis for this under-explored research field.

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